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ABSTRACT

Schools across the United States are creating teacher teams in ever-greater numbers. "Teaming" refers to assembling a group of teachers from different disciplines and/or grade levels who work together as a "core group" responsible for teaching a subset of the school's population. This brief examines some of the potential conflicts between teacher teaming and the development of schoolwide professional community. Drawing on the actual experiences of teachers and administrators in schools, the brief illustrates some of the more common dilemmas faced by schools with a strong commitment to teams. The first section summarizes what has been learned about professional community and its importance to schools. The following sections examine four middle schools that participated in research on school restructuring. In all four schools, teachers expressed enthusiastic support for teaching, but when researchers from the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools began looking at teacher teams in hopes of gaining insight into how teachers think about their work, another important pattern emerged. Teachers reported that teams tended to undermine the ability of the whole faculty to deal with the business of the whole school. The following specific dilemmas sidetracked teachers' attention to schoolwide issues and the development of a schoolwide professional community: time conflicts between team or whole-school issues; increased involvement with their group of students; limited time for peer observation; competition between teams; and the tendency within teams to compromise rather than risk serious disagreement, possibly leading to important issues being watered down. It is hoped that by presenting examples of problems that other schools encounter, teachers, principals, and other educators will learn from their colleagues' experiences and use them as a guide in developing or assessing their own schools and programs. (LMI)

ED 383 082

Brief to principals

Teacher Teaming–Opportunities and Dilemmas

By Sharon Kruse and Karen Seashore Louis

Schools across the United States are creating teacher teams in ever-greater numbers. Researchers and educators alike praise teams for keeping teachers motivated, providing focus for teachers' efforts to improve student performance, and enhancing the development of professional community within a school.

But teacher teaming also can create dilemmas for schools. In fact, evidence from recent studies by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools suggests that under some conditions, teaming can actually hinder the development of a strong schoolwide professional community, and complicate the development of schoolwide standards and vision.

This brief examines some of the potential conflicts between teacher teaming and the development of schoolwide professional community. Drawing on the experiences of teachers and administrators in schools studied by the Center, we illustrate some of the more common dilemmas faced by schools with a strong commitment to teams.

We aren't suggesting that teacher teaming is so fraught with problems that it shouldn't be tried. Nor do we suggest that schools wishing to develop strong teams cannot develop strong schoolwide professional community as well.

Rather, we hope this discussion will help principals and teachers examine their school-reform efforts, with an eye toward avoiding some of the pitfalls that can hinder improvements in teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

First, however, we summarize some of what has been learned about professional community and its importance to schools.[1]

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Professional Community

Teaching and learning do not occur within a single classroom or lesson plan. Each is a complex continuum of experiences taking place within a community. The interactions between teachers and administrators, and the types of relationships they build with students, can have profound effects on student achievement.

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The interactions between teachers and administrators, and the types of relationships they build with students, can have profound effects on student achievement.

Professional community in a school is strong when the teachers demonstrate five critical elements:
1–Reflective Dialogue: discussion which forms the basis for shared norms, beliefs and values that shape plans for action.

2–De-Privatization of Practice: Teachers share practice "in public," learning new ways to talk about what they do and building new relationships with peers.

3–Collective Focus on Student Learning: Teachers assume that all students can learn at reasonably high levels. A mutually felt obligation keeps teachers committed to overcoming the often-daunting obstacles that students face outside of school.

4–Collaboration: Teachers feel encouraged to work together to develop shared understandings of students, curriculum and policy, to produce materials and activities that improve instruction and assessment, and to revamp staff development.

5–Shared Norms and Values: Teachers affirm common values that support a collective focus on student learning.

Within a strong professional community, teachers and administrators continually examine their practice and the conditions that affect their work, with the shared goal of improving student performance. Members of the community feel a mutual sense of support, which sustains those who want to try new methods and ideas.

In some cases, schools that seek strong professional community create formal mechanisms to give teachers some degree of control over classroom practice. Teachers may sit on a governance committee, for example, or a focus group that addresses a particular issue facing the school. As a result, teachers are more likely to feel they've chosen a socially rewarding profession.

The Team Approach

By acknowledging that teaching is dependent on more than one teacher's input or direction, schools are acknowledging that students need to experience unified expectations and messages from all their teachers. Many schools create teacher teams as vehicles for delivering that unified message.

"Teaming" refers to assembling a group of teachers from different disciplines and/or grade levels who work together as a "core group" responsible for teaching a sub-set of the school's population. The school can support a team's collective efforts in a variety of ways, such as assigning team members to the same (or nearby) physical space, creating time during the school day for teams to meet, offering common opportunities for training, and giving teams some measure of control over their practice.

Many educators and researchers claim that teacher teaming can help improve student achievement. In 1989, for example, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development said teacher teams provide "an environment conducive to learning by reducing the stress of anonymity and isolation on students."

Common planning by teachers gives students consistent and clearly understood standards of achievement as goals, the council's report said. And by grappling with problems that span several disciplines, students are encouraged to create

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solutions "that reflect understanding, not memorization." [2]

Teacher teams also help teachers feel more effective, and give them a sense of collegiality. Teachers in teams feel less isolated and have opportunities for more frequent and more in-depth professional discussion. Strong bonds can form between team members, which can make teachers feel supported in exploring new methods and teaching concepts, and free to reflect more deeply on teaching practices. The team structure also supports some types of curricular innovation, such as interdisciplinary lessons. In these ways, teaming seems to bolster professional community.

Teams often serve as a vehicle for teacher involvement in school governance as well. One team member, for example, may be charged with sitting on a governance committee and representing the team in the larger forum.

A Look at Four Middle Schools

As part of our research into the dynamics of professional community, we looked at four middle schools that were taking part in research on school restructuring. All four schools included in this study were deeply committed to teacher teaming, with the stated goal of maintaining a focus on learning that is relevant and meaningful to students.

We chose to examine middle schools because of the rise of the "middle school movement" in the United States in recent years. To effectively reach students between 10 and 15 years old–an age increasingly seen as important for determining later success in school and life–this movement calls for schools to evolve into small, stable communities of learning, where teachers who are experts on dealing with early adolescents deliver a core of cooperative academic programs. Teacher teaming obviously meshes well with this philosophy, and as more schools have sought to emulate the middle-school model, teacher teaming has grown.

The four schools we studied (each of which has been given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality) were:

ASPEN GLEN–A middle school with 26 faculty members serving 440 students in a rural Southwest community of 5,000. Grade-level teams, which were created in 1991, shared an hour of cooperative planning time in shared office space each day. Each teacher also had an hour for individual planning.

BITTERROOT–A junior high school in a largely blue-collar Midwest town of 34,000. It had 460 students in Grades 7 and 8, and a staff of 35 that included 28 teachers. There were two interdisciplinary teams at each grade level, under a structure put in place in 1991. Each team included teachers from four core subjects– math, science, social studies and language arts–and a special-education teacher. Team members shared a 70-minute team planning period each day.

COPAN–One of three schools serving grades 6-8 in a fast-growing suburb of a large Southern city, Copan had more than 1,900 students and 97-full time teachers. Under a structure adopted in about 1980, there were 16 grade-level teams. Each met twice weekly for a common planning period–once to collaborate on curriculum and once to discuss the progress of particular students–usually for about an hour. One teacher from each team served on the school's management council.

SHINING ROCK–Located in a small West Coast city near a major metropolis, Shining Rock served 490 students in grades 6 through 8. The staff included 18 regular class-

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"Either you meet as a team or you meet as a faculty," said one Bitterroot teacher. "It's hard to do both and sustain any workload of tasks. And I admit it, when I'm forced to choose, I always do team-related stuff. I have to look those women in the eye the next day."

room teachers and eight specialists who taught gym, shop, languages and other specialized classes. Teaming began in the 6th grade in 1981 and was expanded to grades 7 and 8 in 1988. There were three grade-level teams; each included six core teachers who worked with 150-165 students. Teams shared a room and had 45 minutes each day for planning.

In all four schools, teachers expressed enthusiastic support for teaming. "Teaming helps me to know what is going on in other teachers' classes," one Aspen Glen teacher said. "I can plan lessons to work with what other teachers are doing and help kids understand the concepts better. I love planning a unit that uses some social studies and some English."

But when researchers from the Center began looking at teacher teams, in hopes of gaining insight into how teachers think about their work, another important pattern soon emerged. Teachers kept saying that teams undermined the ability of the whole faculty to deal with the business of the whole school.

This can create significant problems: Schoolwide collective responsibility for student work can be undermined. Schoolwide coordination suffers. Teacher collaboration on instruction, curriculum and other schoolwide goals becomes haphazard because teachers cannot tap into the intellectual resources of other faculty members.

The comments of the teachers and administrators suggested that schools trying to establish strong schoolwide professional community, while also working to build strong teacher teams, can encounter several specific problems.

Time for Teams or Whole-School Issues?

Inevitably, schools can only devote so much time in a school day to non-classroom work. Even in restructured schools which value teacher planning time, planning is usually an hour a day, at most, beyond the individual planning period.

Each of the four schools in this study set aside time for intensive team meetings. But this meant they had less time for whole-school meetings. "Either you meet as a team or you meet as a faculty," said one Bitterroot teacher. "It's hard to do both and sustain any workload of tasks. And I admit it, when I'm forced to choose I always do team-related stuff. I have to look those women in the eye the next day."

Without the opportunity to talk and share ideas with faculty members who weren't assigned to their teams, many teachers in the four schools said they lost interest in relating to other members of the faculty. "Years ago we had teacher isolation, and then once we reorganized, we had team isolation," a Bitterroot teacher lamented.

This teacher reported that the principal was leading the faculty in several activities aimed at breaking down that isolation, such as cross-team activities. But breaking down that isolation can be a daunting task. Teachers tend to spend their time where they feel most supported, and that means within their teams.

Within the same school, different teams can develop very differently, particularly when each team has a lot of freedom to control curriculum and instruction. One team may develop strong interdisciplinary efforts, for example, while another might concentrate on student-focused efforts and parent involvement, while a third vigorously pursues a process of creating and practicing new instructional techniques.

Because these teams are taking different approaches to teacher-performance, and thereby student performance, there is no common standard throughout the building. In such situations, conversations on common issues, such as teacher responsibilities, do not occur, and teachers don't develop a common understanding of schoolwide issues. "I know the philosophy of my team," one teacher at Shining Rock said, "but the others (only) by rumor or innuendo or something."

In some of the schools we studied, teams also were supposed to be information conduits between the administration and individual teachers. Teachers were supposed to discuss schoolwide issues within their teams, then funnel their input back to a schoolwide forum through a representative. This added to team isolation: Issues that might have been discussed in a whole-group setting were handled within smaller groups instead. There was no forum for teachers to engage in schoolwide dialogue on critical issues.

When teams got together for their own meetings, whole-school issues were items added to an agenda already full of items–such as particular problems with particular students–that may have appeared more pressing to team members. Whole-school

issues, requiring some coordination with teachers from other teams, also are harder to resolve within a team meeting. Teams therefore tended to deal first with business that was intimately shared by team members, while the health and prosperity of the whole school took a back seat.

This led to frustration for teachers anxious to make progress on schoolwide issues that affected their practice. Teachers in all four of the schools in this sample said they were concerned that their schools were "stalled on the important schoolwide tasks."

Narrower Focus

In all four schools, teachers said they were proud to work in teams that were focused on students as whole people. Taking a broader approach to the emotional and educational needs of each individual was very gratifying, they said, and made them feel more responsible for student success. Teachers often said they were motivated to work hard to meet the needs of "our kids." This was especially true in teams set up as "magnet" programs for at-risk students.

But as students cease to be anonymous faces in a crowd, teacher-student relationships can become far more demanding. And as teachers become more deeply involved with the needs of their students, they can lose sight of schoolwide goals, focus and community. Issues of long-term schoolwide effectiveness, and how it can be improved, remain unaddressed.

Limits on Peer Observation

While teachers on a team can use common planning time to meet some goals of improving practice, the team structure can inhibit other strategies. For example, if teachers are holding meetings during their common period, no teaching observation can take place in that period. And with a significant portion of the day already allotted to team meetings, it's less likely there will be time for peer observations with teachers from other teams.

As a result, teachers trying to engage in reflection on practice are often limited to talking about practice, instead of taking part in classroom observations or otherwise getting a first-hand look at the existing practices of other teachers. At Bitterroot, for example, "professional development really just means conversation," a teacher said.

Competition Between Teams

In each of the four schools we studied, one team stood out as the "good team," and was more likely to receive the support and respect of the administration. Members were more likely to get money to attend conferences, for example, or to be included on committees and other influential school bodies.

Some teams became "good teams" because they happened to include a larger number of strong teachers. Others included more single, unattached teachers, who were freer to spend personal time on school business than teachers with family responsibilities. And some teams were made up of people whose personalities and work styles happened to complement each other exceptionally well.

While teachers who find themselves on "the good team" in a school may find it rewarding, this does little to help other teachers at the school feel effective in their jobs. On the contrary, competition and resentment between teams can easily develop.

Other teams, for example, may feel they are told to do things–such as holding breakfast meetings with parents or adopting particular instruction techniques–simply because the good teams did them. This can build resentment that can split the faculty and prevent unity of purpose or goals.

As teachers become more deeply involved with the needs of their particular students, they can lose sight of schoolwide goals, focus and community. Issues of long-term schoolwide effectiveness, and how it can be improved, remain unaddressed.

Principals and other school leaders facing such a situation may wonder: Should I support the good team and help its members continue to be successful, or should I put the needs of the whole school first? At Aspen Glen, this issue came to a head when a superintendent announced plans to break up a "good team," in hopes that its members would improve other teams in the school. That left the teachers on that team feeling they were being punished for doing a good job. "We invested our energy here," said one. "Why should we be split up because other teams don't work well?"

The superintendent in charge of Aspen Glen, however, saw the matter differently. "They are a good team and they've worked well together...." he acknowledged. "I'd like to keep them happy but I need to consider what's best for the whole school, and in this case a transfer would really help out the (other) team."

Teachers unwilling to deal directly with conflict within their team strike compromises instead. Team members end up trading comfort for critical analysis of their work.

The Cost of Keeping the Peace

Teachers in teams often comment on the family-like atmosphere of trust and concern that the teams can inspire. Unfortunately, that also means that teams can duplicate the negative side of family relationships too. The bonds of affection within a team can become rewards in themselves, and teachers sometimes become reluctant to threaten those bonds. They may choose to avoid serious reflection on practice, for example, because they don't want to hurt a colleague's feelings, or to risk being hurt themselves.

In teacher teams, as in real families, "troubles are hard to deal with," one teacher at Aspen Glen said. "People always want to make you feel better rather than discuss things deeply. There are times I'd like to really discuss something–you know, just rip it apart–but that's not something we do."

Teachers unwilling to deal directly with conflict strike compromises instead. In this way, important issues can be watered down by a staff unwilling to risk disagreement. Team members end up trading comfort for critical analysis of their work.

Conclusion

We don't want to leave the impression that teacher teaming shouldn't be tried. Neither do we suggest that schools wishing to develop strong teams cannot develop strong schoolwide professional community as well.

We are simply presenting examples of problems that other schools have encountered, in hopes that teachers, principals and other educators may learn from their colleagues' experiences and use them as a guide in developing or assessing their own schools and programs.

Perhaps school members who are struggling with professional community and teacher teaming will see their own situations reflected in some of these examples, and will use this knowledge to guide efforts at overcoming these challenges. Hopefully, they will find ways to strike a balance between these two important vehicles for cooperation, and thereby maintain their focus on student achievement.

Endnotes

[1]For a more in-depth discussion of professional community, see *Issues in Restructuring Schools* No. 6, Spring 1994. Copies are free and may be ordered by using the card on page 7.

[2]Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.

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